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**"Hammer Your Thoughts Into Unity":  
A Construction of History in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats**

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Yeats came from a family that talked with pride about its ancestry. His Autobiographies describes his childhood fascination with the family stories his mother would tell, and the family history and heirlooms shared by his aunt Mary Yeats. The childish delight in family myth instilled a pride and curiosity about his ancestry in Yeats, which is evident in his description of his ancestors's portraits:

Now that I can look at their miniatures, turning them over to find the name of soldier, or lawyer, or castle official, and wondering if they cared for good books or good music, I am delighted with all that joins my life to those who had power in Ireland or with those anywhere that were good servants and poor bargainers.<sup>1</sup>

His interest in his family is one factor which led Yeats towards a fascination with history, but he was also enormously interested in the way his own generation would appear in history.

Yeats was aware that he was living through a time which would be tremendously significant to history. He could sense the transitions taking place in Irish society during the time surrounding "The Troubles" not only as a poet, playwright and an intellectual, but also as a member of the Irish Senate who headed committees on Education, the state of the Irish language, and the preservation of Irish folklore and art. Yeats was, at the end of his life, the "sixty-year-old smiling public man" he describes himself as in "Among School Children." This would certainly have given Yeats both an occasion to have views and a platform to express them in his old age, but Yeats had been a poet all the while, and had been using his poems as a mode of expression.

Yeats's growth and development, as a man and as a poet, take place in the public world of his poetry. His poems tend to criticize, explain, and illustrate one another, and with

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<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan Publishing, Inc., 1965), p. 12.





his prose works explain the most important themes and relationships in his life.

Yeats's writing expresses a constant self-criticism and self-transformation. The ability constantly to assess his situation as a person and a poet, as well as loyalty and devotion to his ancestors and his friends lead him into an interest in the significance of history. In his mind, identity is dependent upon history, not only in terms of the dependence of persons and political or spiritual groups on what has placed them where they are, but also in the sense that there is a cyclical pattern in history which repeats itself and can be used to understand society and personality. Yeats looks at history in three distinct ways in his career: through his family and friends, through his cyclical analysis of history, and through his explicit understanding of how his own life relates to what is happening to modern poetry and to Ireland in his own time.

Yeats sees himself as one of the few who can appreciate the philosophies and customs of the past, and uses significant moments from his life to connect himself to that past. Poems such as "A Prayer for My Daughter," and "Solomon and the Witch" reveal Yeats's ability to write intensely personal poems about his daughter and his wife which are placed within a larger context of either historical decline, or his vision of the historical cycle.

A Vision is Yeats's attempt to construct a pattern for history, and to explain society and personality by placing historical persons and events within a series of phases of the moon. Yeats was not always able convincingly to explain his cyclical pattern in relation to real events, which led him to discuss his cycle in terms of myth. Most of the cycle poems, including "Leda and the Swan," "The Second Coming," and "The Magi" incorporate mythical or religious subject matter. Yeats uses the cycle as an explanation for artistic patterns in "Sailing to Byzantium," and also uses the cyclical vision of history he constructs in order to explain



the chaos and violence of Ireland during "The Troubles." Yeats explains that the world of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is beset with violence and hatred, and the melting away of decent and necessary traditions and institutions because it is a society at the end of a cycle; the point at which things fall apart. The realization that his generation is on the cusp of falling apart for a new cycle to take over is essential to the way in which Yeats determines his own position in history.

Poems such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," "Easter, 1916," "To A Political Prisoner," and "Meditations in Time of Civil War" discuss political events in Ireland and the way society reacts to these events, supporting Yeats's assertion that the end of a cycle is rapidly approaching. The poems demonstrate that fanaticism, hatred and mockery which suggest the end of a cycle are dominant in Ireland. The poems also illustrate Yeats's talent for presenting oppositions. Although his loathing for political fanaticism is clear in the poems, he is able to recognize the barren beauty of patriotism and martyrdom, which often result from fanaticism.

In addition to an interest in the position the politics of his generation would occupy in history, Yeats was concerned with the historical position of his poetry. He felt strongly that modern poetry was at a point where it was coming to the end of a glorious past. His edition of the 1936 The Oxford Book of Modern Verse reveals that Yeats felt poetry was deteriorating as it became more mechanical and more political. "Under Ben Bulbin" supports this idea as well, and states that society will have to adjust to value, remember, and learn from the past in order to create a great and lasting literature.

Yeats's fascination with the position his generation and his writing would occupy in history led him to criticize the way his generation envisioned history. In his mind, the political and artistic chaos in Ireland was a result of the widespread notion that things were progressing and would



continue to progress. All of the poems in which Yeats questions his political and poetic place in history are reactions not only to "The Troubles" and to what he calls the "Eliot/Auden/Ezra school" of modern poetry, but also to the inability or unwillingness of his society to recognize that progress is not even and inevitable.

The effect that questioning and constructing a vision of history had upon Yeats's poetry was long-lasting and profound. His poems reflect the different ways in which he uses history: to glorify and connect himself to the past; to construct a cyclical pattern for history; and to use the cycle to attempt to find a historical framework for his own time and art. This division of Yeats's historical vision is not a chronological one. I have chosen to divide the poems into three groups thematically because Yeats's interest in and passion for history spanned his entire career, and I am more interested in what the poems say about Yeats and history, and how well they say it, than I am in where certain poems fit within a time frame. Yeats is certainly changing, and, I think, improving all the time, but a rigid adherence to chronological order would detract from an explanation of his historical vision. The poems I have chosen to discuss are not the only poems which contain illustrations of the way in which Yeats envisioned and used history, but are the poems which express his historical vision and concern in what I feel are the most important ways.

Yeats's subjects are diverse, and range from personal, to mythic, to political, to spiritual and philosophic visions, but throughout his career there is a return to his concern with understanding history and placing persons and events within an historical framework. The persistence of this framework within his poems and his prose works ensures a personal explanation of his concerns, his hopes, and his personal and poetic development.



## HIGH TALK

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing  
that catches the eye.

What if my great-grandad had a pair that were  
twenty foot high?

And mine but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon  
higher,

Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a  
fence or a fire.

Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions make  
but poor shows,

Because children demand Daddy-Long-Legs upon his  
timber toes,

Because women in the upper stories demand a face at  
the pane,

That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to  
chisel and plane.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run  
wild,

From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from  
father to child.

All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle  
goose

Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and  
the dawn breaks loose;

I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on,  
stalk on;

Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh  
at the dawn.

- W.B. Yeats -





Yeats used his friends, his family, and the writers he considered to be his poetic predecessors to come to terms with his identity, both as a person and as a writer, during the various phases of his life. His belief that he was descended from a sort of golden age, in which people still believed in heroism and strove to be heroes, dominates his poetry. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" Yeats mourns the fading traditions and institutions of the past:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone  
Which seemed sheer miracle to the multitude...  
We too had many pretty toys when young:  
A law indifferent to blame or praise,  
To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong  
Melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays...

Yeats's certainty that the way of life which encouraged the old habits was about to vanish led him to search for a connection to that vanishing past. The desire to establish an historical link with a fading golden age is a predominant theme in his Autobiographies. "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth, the first book of Autobiographies, is replete with descriptions of the history of the Yeats family.

Yeats's grandfather, William Pollexfen, becomes a symbol of the heroic past which Yeats feels is fading away as the world becomes more mechanical and more reliant upon the promulgation of progress. In the world of 1914, the year in which "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" was written, it would seem far-fetched for an un-educated sea captain who had never been to war to be celebrated as a hero, but Yeats insists that his grandfather was "Old William Pollexfen," one of a long list of "Half legendary men," part of a more colorful society, and "so looked up to and admired that when he returned from taking the waters at Bath his men would light fires along the railway for miles."<sup>2</sup> The idea of a society which would celebrate a man for working hard at his occupation and for being so honest that he would not expect dishonesty from anyone else was appealing to Yeats, and the character he created for his

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<sup>2</sup> William Butler Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan Publishing, Inc., 1965), p. 3.



grandfather is the audience Yeats hoped would read his poems. Yeats understood that his grandfather had a tremendous impact on him, and upon his writing, stating in Autobiographies, "Even today when I read King Lear his image is always before me, and I often wonder if the delight in passionate men in my plays and poetry is more than his memory."<sup>3</sup>

The association of vanishing ideals such as honesty, heroism, and glory with the memory of his grandfather led Yeats to produce poems such as "The Fisherman." This poem presents not only a view of the modern world, the actual audience for Yeats's poetry, but also a view of the past world, the audience for whom Yeats wished he were writing, and the world with which he identified himself. In the modern world there is no place for the fisherman, whom Yeats envisions as a "wise and simple man," a description which could apply to his grandfather. Instead, the modern world has degenerated into a place characterized by:

The beating down of the wise  
And great Art beaten down.

Such a world is unacceptable to Yeats, who escapes it through envisioning himself as the writer who could entertain:

The freckled man who goes  
To a grey place on a hill  
In grey Connemara clothes  
At dawn to cast his flies.

The Fisherman Yeats writes of is a vehicle for him to escape the faulty world of the present. In a world which is driven by the notion that everything keeps getting better, Yeats sets himself apart by identifying his alternatives to the present with the past rather than the future. In Ireland, a country which lost half its population between 1844 and 1914, the remains of the past are places, rather than people such as the fisherman. Yeats felt this strongly, and used specific places to convey the sense of loss he felt in the modern world.

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<sup>3</sup> William Butler Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan Publishing Inc., 1965), p. 4.



"The Wild Swans at Coole" is set in the garden of Coole Park, the ancestral home of Yeats's patron, Lady Gregory, as Yeats muses over the past nineteen years, and considers how:

All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time upon this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trod with a lighter tread.

Yeats uses the swans as a constant in the first part of the poem, comparing the changes which nineteen years have wrought in him with the consistence the swans show to each other and to the pond at Coole Park. Although the hearts of the swans "Have not grown old", his has, and he no longer walks with the light tread of an optimistic young man in love. If the comparison of Yeats to the swans were the only idea in the poem it would exemplify his tendency to incorporate personal history into his poems, but Yeats chooses to incorporate another idea, imagining what will happen when the swans leave Coole Park, and asking:

Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?

This is a troubling question, and one which extends the theme of transience beyond Yeats's realization that he is no longer young, and that he has been scarred by love. In the first four stanzas of the poem Yeats can find some comfort in the fact that although his life is changing there is a structure which never changes, which he illustrates with the swans in Coole. The last stanza denies the comfort of a constant structure, introducing the notion that there may not always be swans at Coole Park. Yeats uses Cole as a symbol of the heroic past in the poem, as well as in prose writings, such as his Memoirs:

How should the world gain if this house failed,  
even though a hundred little houses were the better  
for it, for here power has gone forth or lingered  
giving energy, precision; it gave to a far people  
beneficent rule, and still under its roof living  
intellect is sweetened by old memories of its descent



from far off? How should the world be better if the  
wren's nest flourish and the eagle's house is scattered?<sup>4</sup>

The eagle and the swan are both birds which are associated with nobility, and which belong to a setting that comes from the past. Yeats believes we have come from an age in which we must expect the swans to fly away and not come back, and the eagle's house to be scattered. He illustrates this in the last stanza of the poem, asking what will happen when nobility can no longer be considered a constant at Coole Park, and extending the poem as a meditation on the fading values of a past age.

In addition to using friends and relatives to identify himself with this past age Yeats was enormously interested in exploring his literary history. Although he embraces certain Victorian values, Yeats is adamant that he is a modern poet, asserting in his preface to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse that "Even a long-lived man has the right to consider his own contemporaries modern."<sup>5</sup> Yeats does not interpret the term "modern poet" as someone who believes in progress might understand it. Instead of a deconstruction of all that had come before, and a discussion of the inevitability of what the present has become and the future may contain, Yeats viewed modern poetry as a vehicle to interpret the present in light of the past, and create a mythology which is applicable in the modern world. From Yeats's essays on Shelley and especially Blake, a man whom Yeats reveres as "...a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand,"<sup>6</sup> it is evident that Yeats believed as a young man that he must develop and publicize a mythology. Yeats insists that the ugliness of the modern world is based upon abstraction, which is the result of abandoning and forgetting the old culture, with its old gods, who gave civilization a kind of power, beauty, and passionate intensity that have faded from the modern world.

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<sup>4</sup> William Butler Yeats, Memoirs (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972), p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> William Butler Yeats, ed., The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (London: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. v.

<sup>6</sup> William Butler Yeats, Essays and Introductions (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1961), p. 114.





The first mythology Yeats was to adopt came to him from another great influence, Mr. John O'Leary, who introduced the young poet to the English writings of Irish poets, and nurtured an interest in Irish literature and mythology which characterizes many of Yeats's poems. In spite of his adoption of an Irish mythology, Yeats's ancestry was Anglo-Irish, and consisted of men from the social world of Burke and Swift. Even the audience for his poems, his close friends, and his patron (Lady Gregory) were Anglo-Irish. In spite of this, Yeats continued to write about:

...the lords and ladies gay  
That were beaten into the clay  
Through seven heroic centuries.

The Ireland of "lords and ladies gay," alien to Yeats in race and religion, was nevertheless connected in his mind to the Ireland which produced figures such as his grandfather, and homes such as Coole Park. In fact, as Thomas Whitaker points out, there is an opposition in Yeats claiming as his own tradition ancient Irish myth, with its heroes such as Fergus and Cuchulain, while at the same time claiming the Anglo-Irish tradition of Burke and Swift. The ancient Irish heroes serve different needs in a personal mythology from the Anglo-Irish ones, and Yeats moves towards a less equivocal assertion of his actual biological and cultural heritage, evident in a 1925 Senate speech advocating the legality of divorce:

We against whom you have done this thing, are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Parnell. We have created most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

The merging of heroic Irish myth with Anglo-Irish tradition which enabled Yeats to continue to study and praise Ireland was

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<sup>7</sup> cited in Thomas R. Whitaker, Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue With History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), p. 193.



not unique to him. He was influenced a great deal by the Irish myth translations of Lady Augusta Gregory, the mistress of Coole Park.

The poetic heritage Yeats chose to associate himself with was thus a varied one. He took symbols from Shelley and from Blake, and tied them together with an immense interest in Irish history and literature which he gleaned from O'Leary and Gregory. His respect for British poets and especially strong interest in Irish culture began a life-long insistence that poems rooted in the history of a particular place were superior to other poetry, as Yeats exemplifies in his 1897 essay, "The Tribes of Danu":

When a poet does not write of his own country, the waters and mountains about him, and the lives that are lived amongst them, are less beautiful than they might be...who would not think Prometheus Unbound better to read and better to remember if its legends and its scenery were the legends and the scenery...Shelley had known from childhood and filled with the passion of many memories?<sup>8</sup>

Yeats takes his own advice a step further, and writes about not only "the legends and the scenery" he "had known from childhood," but also about significant memories and events from his own history, and from the history of his poetry. As Yeats matures and rethinks aspects of his life and his philosophy his poems change as well, but all that Yeats writes is rooted in his familial, scholarly, and poetic heritage. Yeats is fond of the idea that his heritage has weighed him down with certain notions of honor. These notions lead him into constant evaluation of both his past actions and his responses to the responsibilities he expects of himself as a poet and a member of a fading but once glorious society. Everything in Yeats has an opposite which creates a constant state of tension, and one of the things which makes Yeats such an honest poet is his ability to evaluate and present that tension. In "Stream and Sun at Glendalaugh," and "Vacillation," the tension

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<sup>8</sup> John P. Frayne and Cotton Johnson, eds., Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats: Volume Two: Reviews, Articles, and other Miscellaneous Prose 1897 - 1939 (London: Macmillan Press, 1975), p. 56.



Yeats writes about is between the weight of the heroic and poetic past he has taken on, and the moments of joy which occur when he can throw off that weight and take on an attitude of personal and poetic irresponsibility. One of the ways he displays both the difficulties and the rewards he incurs as a result of this ongoing evaluation of the past is through depiction of the transformative instant. Yeats describes this instant as the existence of sudden flashes of inspiration which are so significant that after experiencing one the subject realizes that things will never be quite the same. The moment of realization tends to be what Yeats concentrates on when reflecting upon his history. "Stream and Sun at Glendalaugh" is a poem constructed around the remembrance of one such transformative moment. Yeats presents himself contentedly watching the "intricate motions" of "stream and gliding sun," until suddenly his past breaks in upon him, and:

Some stupid thing that I had done  
Made my attention stray.

The stupid action of the past leads Yeats into a reverie about repentance, in which he decides it is foolish to presume he can free himself from doing "stupid thing[s]," since it is unrealistic to suppose he could

Better conduct myself or have more  
Sense than a common man.

The notion that he is a common man, and as such will commit foolish acts, works with the setting of stream and sun to cause Yeats to undergo a transformative moment, which he cannot precisely describe, but rather questions:

What motion of the sun or stream  
Or eyelid shot the gleam  
That pierced my body through?  
What made me live like those who seem  
Self-born, born anew?

Perhaps the gleam Yeats has experienced is a result of his realization that although other men do stupid things they are unable to transport themselves out of regret. They cannot



experience joy the way Yeats is able to, since they live without the responsibilities he has accepted. The discovery is so important to Yeats that he tells the reader in the last stanza that he for a moment was able to live like those who live with no comprehension of guilt or regret. The realization that regret is common to all men, and is permanent as the sun and the stream, combined with the knowledge that he can rise above allowing his regrets to pester him has made Yeats realize he ought not allow guilty or regretful thoughts ruin his delight in sun and stream, and thus the events of an instant have transformed Yeats's thoughts so that things can never be as they were before.

A second illustration of the transformative instant appears in "Vacillation," another poem which features Yeats meandering between the present and his past. The poem begins with Yeats setting forth two realities, that of the heart and that of the body. He illustrates this using the image of a tree "half all glittering flame and half all green" to demonstrate how the heart and body each consume and renew. The poem then sets forth the body's aspirations for material gain, and the heart's desire for love, but indicates that neither can create happiness before warning the reader to "Begin the preparation for your death." At this point Yeats reveals that he has fully accepted neither the body nor the heart, and thus has discovered the joy which eluded him in the first stanza of the poem. Once again Yeats finds a momentary escape from grief and regret in a brief and inexplicable manner. He describes himself as "a solitary man" who is gazing out into the street from a crowded London shop when:

My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

This moment of transformation is also opposed to an image of regret, as Yeats follows it with a description of responsibilities, both those he has met, and those he regrets not meeting. The image of a body blazing and blessed is opposed to the image of a body heavy since "Responsibility so weighs me down."





The instant of transformation is slightly more complicated in "Vacillation" than it is in "Stream and Sun at Glendalaugh," since Yeats is not reborn or transported out of his reverie on past regrets, but is drawn into it more forcefully than before, lamenting:

Things said or done long years ago,  
Or things I did not do or say  
But thought that I might say or do,  
Weigh me down...

This despair over unfulfilled responsibilities and other regrets from the past is inserted between the description of Yeats's moment of transformation and the realization it affords him, to "let all things pass away," which is used as the refrain for the next section of the poem. The decision to separate the description of his transformative instant from his interpretation of its meaning is a more realistic approach to the way Yeats reacted to his flashes of inspiration, suggesting he thought them over carefully before fitting them into his poetry.

Both poems suggest Yeats was interested in interpreting his past behavior, but in the end reaches the conclusion that he is not permanent, like the sun and stream, and it is of more value for him to concentrate on finding joy through a recognition and acceptance of the world, which is apart from oneself, indifferent to oneself, permanent, and beautiful, than it is to worry about things which will pass away.

The epiphany Yeats explores in "Stream and Sun at Glendalaugh" and in "Vacillation" is of a nature which is solitary and instantaneous: a moment of inspiration which forces him to reevaluate his priorities. Yeats also writes about events in his life which transform his way of thinking, or force him to explain his philosophy or code of values. His marriage is one such event, which he writes about in "Solomon and the Witch," and the birth of his daughter, meditated on in "A Prayer for my Daughter" is another.

"Solomon and the Witch" is an unconventional love poem, in which Yeats explains the difficulties which marriage creates, and



compliments his wife for working through the difficulties with him. As Elizabeth Cullingford points out, "Solomon and the Witch" replaces the traditional marriage poem, the epithalamion, in which the bride receives no voice, with a poem in which Yeats allows his wife, in the voice of Sheba, to describe their wedding night before he ponders the transformations married life will create in both man and wife.<sup>9</sup> Yeats delights in the notion that his marriage was brought about through a unity of chance - or luck - with choice - a personal decision - but recognizes that chance and choice can be cruel as well, since:

...love has a spider's eye  
To find out some appropriate pain.

Yeats obviously realizes that love can be painful, since it causes the lover to see his beloved in a myriad of different ways, and since "all passion's in the glance," or all that we see is informed by our passions. Even if chance and choice can survive these obstacles, marriage leads to further difficulties, and for some:

Maybe the bride-bed brings despair,  
For each an imagined image brings  
And finds a real image there.

Although Yeats worries that marriage will cause the painful realization that the person he married is not the person he imagined her to be, there is the chance that an image can be real and distinct from the spider's eye. Such an image would enable a superior love, combining luck and decision to be true, and not subjective and arbitrary. Yeats and his wife are trying to find this type of love, where chance and choice "though several are a single light," and Yeats ends the poem optimistic that their love will conquer the difficulties of the imagined image, as his wife, in the character of Sheba, asks "O! Solomon! let us try again!" to reach the authentic and validated images of each other, and thus to establish that the images they have of one another are true.

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge



"Solomon and the Witch" articulates Yeats's realization that marriage is a coming to terms with the acceptance of the person you have married at the expense of the dissolution of the images you have created about that person. His marriage led Yeats into questioning what love is, and in the end he describes it as a continual construction and destruction of images in order to know completely the person you love, and to reconcile chance and choice truly.

The birth of his daughter led Yeats into another round of questioning, this time about the way for her to lead a happy life. In "A Prayer for my Daughter" Yeats lists the qualities he wants for Anne: beauty, but not too much beauty, kindness, self-sufficiency, friendship, and appreciation for custom and ceremony. These are the things fathers usually want for their daughters, but Yeats explains and emphasizes his desires by referring to his own history.

Various women Yeats has known appear in the poem as illustrations of what happens to a woman who does not possess the characteristics he desires for his daughter. In general:

...the minds that I have loved,  
The sort of beauty that I have approved  
Prosper but little.

Specifically he refers to the disasters encountered by Con Markievitz and Maud Gonne through political fanaticism and bad decisions about men. Beauty is dangerous: Helen of Troy "had much trouble from a fool," and Venus "chose a bandy-legged smith for a man":

Tis certain that fine women eat  
A crazy salad with their meat  
Whereby the horn of plenty is undone.

The problems which beautiful women face are to be feared, but the trap of intellectual abstraction is more dangerous:

An intellectual hatred is the worst,



So let her think opinions are accursed.  
 Have I not seen the loveliest woman born  
 Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,  
 Because of her opinionated mind  
 Barter that horn and every good  
 By quiet natures understood  
 For an old bellows full of angry wind?

The qualities Yeats desires for his daughter reveal his personal history, since his experience and the experience of those around him provide a basis for the hopes and fears he has for his daughter. The poem also provides a place for Yeats to reiterate his belief that the traditions and institutions of a fading golden age with which he identifies himself are superior to the present chaos. In a world in which it is not unusual to see "A Helen of social-welfare dream," who "Climb[ed] on a wagonette to scream" it becomes increasingly important to hold onto a sense of order which the traditions of the past provide, and Yeats wishes his daughter a life removed from the chaos of the present:

Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;  
 For arrogance and hatred are the wares  
 Peddled in the thoroughfares.  
 How but in custom and in ceremony  
 Are innocence and beauty born?

A life of custom and ceremony will not only protect his daughter from a life of bitter and angry intellectual hatred, but will also train her, like her father, to remain "Rooted in one dear perpetual place" : the past which still assigns importance to custom and ceremony.

"The Circus Animals's Desertion" is a personal history poem which focuses on the poetical problems Yeats faced rather than on people who were important to him. Since so many of Yeats's poems were based upon his life a summary of his past themes succeeds as a summary of his maturity as a man and as a poet. The poems he has written are referred to as "circus animals" who put on a show for an audience, and who are somehow heroic and larger-than-life, as were the heroes of his early Celtic Twilight poems, characters such as Oisín, Fergus and Cúchulain. Yeats tells the reader that these poems were brought about not because of a genuine interest





in Irish mythology, but rather because the stories seemed exciting to a young man who wanted a love like the ones his heroes had:

But what cared I that set him on to ride,  
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

Next, Yeats seeks to explain the influence of his unreturned love for Maud Gonne had upon his works, and tells the reader that Irish mythology allowed him to break free of this stage of his life as well, since "The Countess Cathleen" was written for Maud Gonne:

I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,  
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,  
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough  
The dream itself had all my thought and love.

The force of his poetry was strong enough that "...when all is said / It was the dream itself enchanted me." The life-experiences which underlie his poems prove more real to him than the poems which have grown out of them, which seem to be a fantasy, or a circus; images of powerful emotions he does not feel himself capable of, as he relates in the evaluation he gives of his writing in The Bounty of Sweden:

...[my poems] stir my interest by their appropriateness to the men I imagine myself to be, or by their accurate description of some emotional circumstance...I print the poem and never hear about it again, until I find the book years after with a page dog-eared by some young man, or marked by some girl with a violet, and when I have seen that I am ashamed, as though somebody were to attribute to me a delicacy of feeling I should, but do not possess. What came so easily at first, and amidst so much drama, and was written so laboriously at the last, cannot be counted among my possessions.<sup>10</sup>

The poems are the way Yeats would prefer to remember his life, since they have an order and sense of grandeur he sees as lacking in his own life. He loved the symbols, but not the world they reflect:

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<sup>10</sup> William Butler Yeats, The Bounty of Sweden (Macmillan Press, 1965), p. 359.



Players and painted stage took all my love,  
And not those things that they were emblems of.

In his poems Yeats finds a world that is idealized, the world of "pure mind," which is vastly superior to the world of the actual, in which they began. He sees his verse as a ladder, which leads him from the filth of the real world, which is described as a jumbled heap of unwanted and useless objects:

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till.

These unnecessary and unused things are the memories of a life which Yeats feels are stored in the heart the way rubbish is stored in a rag-and-bone-shop. His memories have been lifted from the pile of useless objects and transformed into something which is useful because he has worked them into poetry. The superiority of poetic memory to a plain recitation of events which transformed his life relates to Yeats's interest in phantasmagoria, and his belief "...that in practical life the mask is more than the face."<sup>11</sup> His personal history might have no value on its own, but as the fuel for a poem it can be used to organize and partially transcend the clutter "In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart," as well as to entertain and instruct. Yeats appears to be clearing out the clutter of his life, perhaps taking his own advice from "Vacillation," and beginning the preparation for his death. He chooses the periods of his life which he views as most significant to his writing; the heroic love poetry of his Celtic Twilight period, the years he loved Maud Gonne and the poems and play he wrote for her, and his years of work for the Abbey Theatre, and uses them to explain who he was. In this way the reader (and most likely Yeats as well) is entertained with a brief summary of his poetic and personal life, and is instructed as to which events and works Yeats found to be most significant. The root of high poetry in base personal experience is again played

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<sup>11</sup> William Butler Yeats, Memoirs (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), p. 254.



with, since the poem came about as an attempt to impose order upon the experiences of a full and varied life, and since in the end base personal experience must triumph, and Yeats, no matter how immortal his poetry, will be forced to "lie down where all the ladders start."

On another level, the poem is Yeats's reflection on the difficulties of being a poet. He is driven to a remembrance of his past poetry because he is searching for more poetic images, complaining in the first lines of the poem:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,  
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.

The poems and characters he remembers are the sources for his past poetry, and he worries that he will be unable to find another source for his verse, and:

Maybe at last, being but a broken man,  
I must be satisfied with my heart...

Although seeking refuge in "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" relates to Yeats's life and death, which are very personal, if apart from his poetry, it also relates to his determination to reevaluate his memory continually in search of something to spur him on to verse. This evaluation of the difficulties he faces as a poet is every bit as personal as a discussion of his memories, his friends, and his anticipation of death.

Yeats was constantly writing about his lineage and his life, in poetry, in prose works, and in his letters. In a letter to Olivia Shakespear dated August 1, 1921, he discloses a possible rationale behind his constant scrutiny of his past:

I find this memoir writing makes me feel clean, as if I had bathed and put on clean linen. It reminds me of something, and I shall return to poetry with a renewed simplicity.

The act of writing memoirs was thus bound up with the act of writing verse in some way, and perhaps the overlap of memoir and poem in works such as "The Fisherman," "The Wild Swans at Coole," "Stream and Sun at Glendalaugh," "Vacillation," "Solomon and the



Witch," "A Prayer for my Daughter," and "The Circus Animals's Desertion" is what makes Yeats's poetry so honest. A reading of his poetry and prose works, from the first Celtic Twilight works to the late philosophic and self-exploratory ones proves Yeats right when he asserts in his last letter, written to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, and dated January 4, 1939, "Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it. I must embody it in the completion of my life." The emphasis Yeats places on exploring his family lineage, his friends and their affect upon him, his poetic lineage and the way events in his own life have affected him ensures that he has always embodied truth in his writing.





I tried to somehow interest my readers in an  
unexplained rule of thumb that somehow explained  
the world.

- W.B. Yeats -

from  
A Vision



Yeats's belief that the past was better than the present is overwhelmingly evident in his cyclic construction of history, which states the past was better than the present, and the future will continue to devolve. Finally, civilization will reach a nadir, after which things will improve with a new cycle. On May 4, 1937, as he was correcting the proof sheets of A Vision, the book in which he most fully explains his cyclic plan of history, Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley about how modern politics confirmed the cycle:

I begin to see things double - doubled in history, world history, personal history. At this moment all the specialists are about to run together in our new Alexandria, thought is about to be unified as its own free act, and the shadow in Germany and elsewhere is an attempted unity by force...You must feel plunged as I do, into the madness of vision, into a sense of the relation between separated things that you cannot explain and that deeply disturbs emotion.

Yeats wrote a number of poems about the madness of vision and its connection with a cyclic view of history, including "The Second Coming," "Leda and the Swan," "The Magi," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Ben Bulbin," and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." As his interest in personal history reveals, in Yeats's mind identity is dependent upon history. This is not only in terms of the dependence of persons and political or spiritual groups on what has placed them where they are, but also in the sense that there is a cyclical pattern in history which repeats itself and which can be used to understand personality. Yeats believes that we are all living in a particular stage in the cycle, but may have ideas or talents which belong to another stage in the cycle. This means the best way to understand a person is to determine which cycle his or her ideas reflect most accurately.

His use of the cycle as a method to determine why certain people and groups act the way they do makes Yeats's construction an arbitrary one, which occasionally contradicts



itself, and is never entirely plausible. It came about as a result of Yeats's dissatisfaction with viewing history as a line which must always progress or a circle which can only loop back onto itself. A fragment of a 1931 letter to Mario M. Rossi elaborates on Yeats's need for a new way to construct history:

I understand that reality is timeless, and the past and present constitute the most obvious of the autonomies. But I cannot follow your further analyses. There is 'the straight line' in every novelty, and there is the circle joined, or the absolute return or finish. There is no spiral, no curve. We have only those two absolutes, and all partial returns are constructions of the mind. Is that your thought?

The linear and circular visions of history were not large enough for Yeats to include all of the various interests he found vital to a construction of history. He needed space to include his literary biases, his spiritual meddlings, his fascination with the past, and his belief that history passed through a cycle which affected creativity, politics, and art. The cycle made it easier for Yeats to illustrate his insistence that there are two main emphases which affect civilization, a concentration on whim, and a concentration on task. Whim makes up the first half of the cycle, which is recognized by a sense of subjectivity and freedom, and task occupies the second half of the cycle, in which objectivity and things take priority, until:

Personality is everywhere spreading out its fingers in vain, or grasping with an always more convulsive grasp a world where the predominance of physical science, of finance and economics in all their forms, of democratic politics, of vast populations, of architecture where styles jostle one another, of newspapers where all is heterogeneous, show that mechanical force will in a moment become supreme.<sup>12</sup>

Yeats recognized the motion from whim to task in a number of myths, which he adopted as the base for his cycle.

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<sup>12</sup> William Butler Yeats, A Vision (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1938), p. 296.



Myth plays a huge part in Yeats's determination of the historical cycle, and most of the cycle poems are bound up in the events of historic myth rather than pure history. Yeats began the cycle as a mathematical explanation of history, but realized as he was writing it that it was based on spiritualism, philosophy and myth as much as on history and mathematics, and questioned himself:

Will some mathematician some day question and  
understand, as I cannot, and confirm all, or  
have I also dealt in myth?<sup>13</sup>

A Vision is concerned with history, which Yeats interprets by means of geometrical constructs, ancient philosophy, art, spiritualism<sup>14</sup> and myth. In his mind, it is natural to consider all of these things when considering history, since the most perfect time in the past is the time when all of the above elements were woven together, and the problem with the present is that the modern view of progress seeks to separate them from each other. A Vision applies to history the alternation of whim and task, by theorizing that by following the spontaneous movement of personality men create a synthesis of the elements of life, art, and philosophy, but afterwards, in following duties increasingly apart from each other and from human life and beauty, men fracture the synthesis that their fathers made. Yeats arranges this process in twenty-eight stages, which correspond to twenty-eight phases of the moon:

I tried to interest my readers in an unexplained rule  
of thumb that somehow explained the world. This wheel  
is every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-

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<sup>13</sup> William Butler Yeats, A Vision (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1938), p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Yeats tends to confuse spiritualism and the spiritual. Although there is a definite difference between the group who surrounded Madame Blavatsky and believed in spirits and mediums and automatic writing, and the exploration of one's own spirit, Yeats tends to use the term "spiritual" to refer to a combination of the two, a sort of exploration of one's spirit through a combination of religion and the spiritualist craze of the 1890's, and I prefer to use the term as he understood it.





eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgment or act of thought. Man seeks his opposite, attains his object, so far as it is attainable, at Phase Fifteen, and returns to Phase One again.<sup>15</sup>

Yeats's cyclical vision is an elaborate metaphor which he constructs in order to explain what he thinks is wrong with the present, what was good about the past, and what he fears for the future. This metaphor is further explained in his poetry. "Leda and the Swan" is the start of the cycle, the point at which power, knowledge, love and war begin. The rape of Leda leaves civilization in a position in which myth, philosophy, spiritualism and art are invoked in order to describe and attempt to understand the quest for knowledge and power which develops out of the love and war with which Zeus impregnated Leda. Yeats uses the Petrarchan sonnet form in order to emphasize the moment when the cycle begins. The moment when the rape has been accomplished is the narrative moment which separates the old cycle from the new, and the structural moment which separates the octet from the sextet. The beginning of the new cycle is described in a foreboding way:

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon dead.                    Being so caught up,  
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Yeats locates the beginning of his cycle in Greek myth, but chooses an incident in Greek mythology which is violent and vulgar in the manner of Irish mythology (which incorporates heroines such as "great-bladdered Emer") and which also has parallels to Christianity, since, like the story of the Virgin, it is the story of a woman who is impregnated by a

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<sup>15</sup> William Butler Yeats, A Vision (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1938), p. 81.



divine figure, and the children of both women begin a religious cycle. Yeats finds the story of Leda and the Swan a good beginning for his cycle, since it raises a couple of unanswerable questions, which will have to be explored in order to understand the past, explain the present, and predict the future of the cycle. Zeus clearly left civilization with some power since Leda's children, (Helen of Troy, and Agamemnon's wife, Clytaemnestra) become symbols of two violently powerful forces, love and war. Yeats draws a strong distinction between knowledge and power, realizing that Leda has clearly passed her power on to society, and that the power she left will lead society into a search for knowledge in order to understand its power, and that search will force his cycle into movement towards the perfection in understanding which is the fifteenth phase. The myth of Leda brings up another question which is useful to Yeats and his cycle theory, the unknown completion of the tale. Yeats includes a copy of the poem to begin the chapter "Dove or Swan?" in his A Vision, and follows it with the explanation:

I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as  
made to Leda, remembering that they showed in a Spartan  
temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic,        an  
unhatched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs  
came Love and from the other War.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that Yeats incorporates the poem into "Dove or Swan?" since the chapter is based on conjecture about what will follow Yeats's part of the cycle. The worry over what is coming next, and the fear that it will not be as good as what came before is symbolized in the unknown occupant of Leda's unhatched egg. In the first part of A Vision, Yeats describes Michael Robartes informing his students that he intends to return to the East to plant Leda's third egg in the sand, and allow it to hatch in the heat of the sun. "The Second Coming"

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<sup>16</sup> William Butler Yeats, A Vision (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1938), p. 268.



relates Yeats's vision of the unknown future that would result from Robartes's act.

Yeats links a vision of the modern world with both fear of the future and confidence in his cycle myth to create a powerful and prophetic poem in "The Second Coming." Clearly, Yeats views modern life as fractures of the whole which was achieved at Phase Fifteen, and knows that the degeneration into fragments means a new cycle is about to begin. Yeats starts with a description of the present world, in which:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold:  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned:  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Society degenerates into a state of violence, (recalling the society of Leda, and the violence used on her, which began the first cycle,) because the best minds are incapable of fighting against the passionate intensity which the worst use to drown innocence. Yeats uses the devices of beast and birth again here, describing a sinister creature:

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.

The "blank and pitiless" gaze of this beast is similar to the "indifferent beak" of the creature that began Leda's cycle. Both beasts are the impetus for a new cycle, but neither is concerned with the changes the cycle will present to civilization. The cycle will begin with a birth, as Leda's cycle and the Christian cycle did. Yeats questions what will come about as a result of this new birth, but is emphatically pessimistic about the outcome, since the age of Leda was "...vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle" which developed into the fragmentation of the present, and that which is to come is presented as potentially worse than the present, as Yeats questions:



And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The idea that the world of the present is unacceptable, and that a new phase in the cycle is about to come around again is a theme in "The Magi" as well. "The Magi," like "The Second Coming," uses Christian imagery to illustrate the inevitability of the destruction of the current cycle to make way for a new one. Yeats was well aware of how useful Christian imagery was to his poetry and to his definition of the cycle. In his 1900 essay entitled "The Symbolism of Poetry" he was already exploring the idea that progress was detrimental to civilization and that religious imagery was one method he could use to express that idea in his poetry, asking:

How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's  
hearts that we call the progress of the world, and  
lay their hands on men's heartstrings again, without  
becoming the garment of religion as in old times?

"The Magi" takes on the garment of religion by revealing the Magi as an element in both the Christian world and in Yeats's cycle. They are imagined by Yeats as being permanent mythic beings, "the pale unsatisfied ones," who have watched the present cycle reach a point of instability and are eager to see whether the oncoming cycle will fare better:

...hoping to find once more,  
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,  
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

The cycle Yeats identifies himself with, which is primarily Christian, was not ended by the events at Calvary. Instead, the cycle has progressed to a point at which civilization no longer considers myth, religion, or the arts seriously, a point at which "the centre cannot hold," and a new cycle must begin "on the bestial floor." The beginning of a new cycle is again linked with indifference, with birth, and with beasts,





just as the annunciation of new cycles is depicted in "Leda and the Swan," and in "The Second Coming." These poems are all prophetic poems, since they both delineate the idea of the cycle, setting forth images of the modern world which not only suggest a new cycle is about to begin, but also suggest the uncertainty and fear of the transitional period between cycles. The poems very clearly sing "of what is past, or passing, or to come."

Yeats believed that the city of Byzantium was the closest civilization had ever come to reaching the uninhabited perfection of Phase Fifteen. He insisted:

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before  
or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic  
and practical life were one, that architect and  
artificers spoke to the multitude and the few alike.<sup>17</sup>

Byzantium was an important symbol for Yeats. It illustrated a world in which civilization followed its every whim in order to create art which could speak to everyone, and because of this Yeats used it to illustrate a different form of cycle, the life cycle of the poet and the poem. Yeats was deeply concerned with his aging, and worried over how age would affect him as a poet, since he saw age as an impediment to writing about "...the young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees" and other stereotypical subjects expected of poets. Yeats is weary of the tug-of-war between his aging body and his soul, located in his heart, which he describes as:

...sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is.

Yeats would rather leave the cycle of birth and death, for an artificial world based on art, in which he could inhabit:

...such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make

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<sup>17</sup> William Butler Yeats, A Vision (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1938), p. 279.



Of hammered gold and gold enameling.

Such a body would reflect the soul of a poet, remaining constant to "the singing-masters of my soul" and not confining a singing soul within an aged body, no better than "a tattered coat upon a stick." The world of artifice which Yeats longs to inhabit would allow him to partially exist outside the cycle, the way the Magi are depicted as works of art who exist from cycle to cycle awaiting the appearance of Phase Fifteen, with "...their stiff, painted clothes...and all their helms of silver hovering side by side." Like the Magi, Yeats wants to be a prophet of the cycle, and sit:

...upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Yeats defines the phase of total beauty as the Fifteenth Phase, which is uninhabited. Since they are not able to experience the fifteenth phase, artists are limited to relating the current and the real, as Yeats points out:

I think that we who are poets and artists, not  
being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible,  
must go from desire to weakness and so to desire  
again, and live but for the moment when vision  
comes to our weariness like terrible lightning.<sup>18</sup>

The cycle of creation for the artist or poet is similar to Yeats's overall cycle, in which all leads to Phase Fifteen, the phase of perfection echoed in the moment of vision, and after reaching it all returns to imperfection until a new cycle must begin. The art remains both as a record of the artist's place in the cycle, and as a prophecy of the cycle's continual dying and renewal.

Yeats incorporated his poetic predecessors into his cyclic theory, as the critic Helen Vendler has argued convincingly in her Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays. Since Yeats's world is in a constant state of flux, ascending or

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<sup>18</sup> William Butler Yeats, Mythologies (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1959), p. 340.



descending from the phase of enlightenment most directly linked to poetic inspiration, the poets he respected the most are the ones he places on either side of Phase Fifteen. The importance of Shelley and Blake's works to Yeats is illustrated in the positioning of Blake in Phase Sixteen, immediately following the state of highest enlightenment, and immediately preceding Shelley and Yeats, who are positioned in Phase Seventeen. The position afforded to Blake and to Shelley in relation to himself and in relation to Phase Fifteen suggests that Yeats viewed Blake as the poet who was closest to reaching truth, as well as implying he was an important predecessor for Shelley, and for himself. The placement of Shelley at the same point in the cycle in which he sees himself reveals a more forceful act of literary criticism woven into the cycle metaphor. His placement reveals that although Yeats respected Shelley's work he could find fault with it, and viewed it as on par with, rather than superior to his own.

Yeats's interest in Shelley is not only reflected in his placement in the cycle, but also is evident in Yeats's borrowing of some of his images for "Under Ben Bulbin." This is one of Yeats's last poems, which brings up the cycle in terms of poetry, myth, and Yeats's personal history. The poem begins with Yeats establishing his place in the poetic cycle, next to Shelley and other poets who:

Swear by what the sages spoke  
Round the Mareotic Lake  
That the witch of Atlas knew,  
Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.

After placing himself within a poetic cycle, Yeats places himself within the human cycle of birth and death, in which:

A brief parting from those dear  
Is the worst men have to fear

since the larger overall cycle will:

...thrust their buried men



Back in the human mind again.

The cycle which renews and repeats itself can best be seen in the arts, as Yeats argued in "Sailing to Byzantium." Here he urges his audience to remember the various cycles immortalized by the art of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Renaissance Italy, and finally the phases close to his own in the cycle, those of "Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude" who painted before "Confusion fell upon our thought."

The confusion which has fallen upon modern thought is the subject of another cycle poem, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Yeats insists that 1919 is at the end of a cycle, and that people are refusing to see it, as human nature ensures that people will always refuse to see the end of their civilization. He explains that many things have been destroyed which:

...seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,  
Protected from the circle of the moon  
That pitches common things about.

He goes on to illustrate the population of Leda's cycle, and their disbelief the cycle could be ending:

None dared admit, if such a thought were his,  
Incendiary or bigot could be found  
To burn that stump on the Acropolis,  
Or break in bits the famous ivories.

The disbelief which attended the end of Leda's cycle is compared to that of the public of the present, who refuse to see the violence and "traffic in mockery" which signify "that clamour of approaching night." It is difficult for those who inherit "many pretty things" to reconcile the joy these things afford them with the inevitability of their destruction and the end of a cycle. Unlike the public of any previous cycle, Yeats dares in a number of his poems to admit





his thought that civilization is nearing the end of a cycle. The cycle metaphor is vital to Yeats's view of history, since it provides him with a system which supports his opinion that the present is not as good as the past, and confirms his fear that the future will be even worse. Yeats uses the cycle in order to set out a pattern in which civilizations attempt to synthesize philosophy, art, spiritualism and myth, following whim in order to reach an enlightened state, and then unweave the elements with a concentration on task until a new cycle is inevitable. In addition, he uses the cycle as a way to judge literature and art, in terms of which part of the cycle the artist came from, and a way to place himself within an artistic and historical context.



[Aristocracies, countrymen and artists] look backward to a long tradition, for being without fear, they have held to whatever pleased them. The others, being always anxious, have come to possess little that is good in itself, and are always changing from thing to thing, for whatever they do or have must be a means to something else, and they have so little belief that anything can be an end in itself that they cannot understand if you say 'All the most valuable things are useless.' They prefer the stalk to the flower, and believe that painting and poetry exist that there may be instruction, and love that there may be children...At all times they fear and even hate the things that have worth in themselves.

- W.B. Yeats -

from  
"Poetry and Tradition"



Yeats's cyclical theory of history is a reaction to the belief in progress that characterized the world of his youth. Yeats interprets the fragmentation of the modern world as a direct result of the belief in gradual and inevitable progress. As he argues in his 1900 essay, "The Theatre," there is progress, but it happens differently from the way most people envision it:

All life is revelation beginning in miracle and enthusiasm, and dying out as it unfolds itself into what we have mistaken for progress. It is one of our illusions, as I think, that education, the softening of manners, the perfecting of laws - countless images of a fading light - can create nobleness and beauty, and that life moves slowly and evenly toward some perfection. Progress is miracle, and it is sudden.

Yeats strongly disagrees with the idea that life will get better gradually. His cyclical arrangement of history argues that progress is not inevitable, and things don't gradually become better; they haven't in the past, and they aren't going to in the future. The belief in slow and inevitable progress encourages cowardice and fanaticism, and results in society giving up the good and noble things (education, manners, and laws) it needs. Without these, society degenerates into fragmentation and violence, and denial of the cycle in favor of progress paradoxically speeds up the end of an age, making things fall apart. In a letter to Ethel Mannin, dated 11 December, 1936, Yeats explains:

I am alarmed at the growing moral cowardice of the world as the old society disappears - People run in packs that they may get courage from one another and even sit at home and shiver.

The mistaken notion of what progress is, and how it works, and the image of a society of moral cowards run throughout "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Prior to the "Troubles" Irish society thought it had progressed to a point where further progress was guaranteed:

Public opinion ripening for so long



We thought it would outlive all future days.  
 O what fine thought we had because we thought  
 That the worst rogues and rascals had died out.

In Yeats's mind it is ridiculous to think the worst have died out, since certain events and actions will occur in every time and in every place. The notion of war and the atrocities which accompany it is not as terrifying to Yeats as the notion that people can convince themselves that war and atrocity are impossible in their place and time. The belief that things will always get better creates a sort of cowardice, since the refusal to believe society could fall apart creates terror and chaos when the inevitable occurs, when:

...a drunken soldiery  
 Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
 To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;  
 The night can sweat with terror as before  
 We pierced our thoughts into philosophy.

The violence which society refused to believe was possible is all the worse when it occurs, because it creates a setting which makes it easy for the public to believe thoughtless but passionate opinions expressed by those with shallow wits, "who are but weasels fighting in a hole." Such violence results in a group-think mentality in which people "traffic in mockery" and belittle the accomplishments of those who will not join their group. The mocking begins with the great, who "toiled so hard and late / To leave some monument behind," then shifts to the wise who were unable to see "how seasons run / And now but gape at the sun," and finally slanders the good, "That thought that goodness might be gay." In the end, all that remains is for mockers to mock themselves:

That would not lift a hand maybe  
 To help good, wise, or great  
 To bar that foul storm out.





Eventually, mockery and violence will destroy beauty, dignity, decency and innocence, and the story of Ireland will be equated to the story of Lady Kyteler and "that insolent fiend" Robert Artisson, since Ireland has been enchanted by the idea of banding into fanatic groups to find courage the way Lady Kyteler turned to the incubus to find love.

Yeats reaffirms this idea in his Memoirs, blaming faulty education - in his mind, modern education - for the acceptance of "The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth" over honor and truth:

The Irish people until they are better educated must dream impermanent dreams, and if they do not find them they will be ruined by the half-sirs with their squalid hates and envies...the people cry out for stones and vapour, pedantry and hysteria, rhetoric and sentiment.

Modern education in Ireland has created a generation of people who will tear down the monuments of the past to make way for a mediocre and impermanent future.

"Meditations in Time of Civil War" continues Yeats's attack on the idea that life will always get better, and implies the crowd is cowardly, easily motivated by hysteria and sentiment, and inferior in strength to a solitary individual. Yeats begins his discussion of progress by drawing our attention to the great houses of Ireland, which he uses as a symbol of the nation itself, formed by "bitter and violent men," and inhabited by their descendants, who may not keep the standard envisioned by the founders, since:

...when the master's buried mice can play,  
And maybe the great-grandson of that house,  
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

A shift in status from master to mouse is not an indication of progress, and Yeats fears that his own descendants will experience the same degradation, as a result of:

...too much business with the passing hour,  
Through too much play or marriage with a fool.



The crumbling of an old generation leads to the creation of a new one, but that is not necessarily progress, as Yeats suggests in his description of his crumbling house:

My wall is loosening;...  
 We are closed in, and the key is turned  
 On our uncertainty; somewhere  
 A man is killed, or a house burned,  
 Yet no clear fact to be discerned:  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

The reason that Ireland is crumbling and "no clear fact [can] be discerned" is that society has chosen to focus on its hatred and the fanatical opinions that result from that hatred rather than remembering its heritage:

We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
 The heart's grown brutal from the fare;  
 More substance in our enmities  
 Than in our love.

The crowd finds it simpler to hate than to study and remember the past, or to reason, and "the unremembering hearts and heads" of modern Ireland will be the force that destroys the past, as enmities overstep love and rage gives way to indifference, until:

...eyes that rage has brightened...  
 Give place to an indifferent multitude, give place  
 To brazen hawks. Nor self-delighting reverie,  
 Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's  
     gone,  
 Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency  
 The innumerable clanging wings that have put out  
     the moon.

The entrenchment of political fanaticism comes at the expense of a sense of history and pride in one's country or family, and is a gradual failing, beginning with hatred and ending with complete indifference. Yeats describes the Easter Rebellion of 1916 as the act of fanatics which begins the hatred that leads to the indifference of civil war. In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, dated 9 October, 1922, Yeats worries that civilization is about to reach the indifferent



stage, after exhausting its hatred. He describes Ireland as a society so indifferent to its future that it replaces theology with politics, and so complacent that it is content to exist in the aftermath of a martyrdom without hating what is to come or pitying the loss of innocence which existed before the Easter Rebellion resulted in martyrs and hatred. He explains this to Shakespear:

We are entering on the most final and dreadful stage.  
Perhaps there is nothing so dangerous to a modern  
state, when politics take the place of theology, as  
a bunch of martyrs. A bunch of martyrs (1916) were  
the bomb, and we are living in the explosion.

Although Yeats clearly detests the political fanaticism which led to the sacrifice of the Easter Rebellion, he is forced to recognize that it has placed him in vacillation between two opposing forces. He is caught between celebrating martyrdom and condemning fanaticism, as "Easter, 1916" makes clear:

All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

The poem on one level functions as a record of those who "dreamed and are dead," remembering them as ordinary acquaintances to be "passed with a nod of the head." On another level it demonstrates the significance of a rebellion which to Yeats seemed "a casual comedy" which might, even today, be an unnecessary sacrifice, since "England may keep faith / For all that is done and said." In Yeats's opinion the rebellion, no matter how unnecessary, was inevitable, since the participants were so obsessed with a cause that they were incapable of making a responsible decision. He describes the results of fanaticism as an inability to conceive of change, since hatred in the service of a cause is held up as a constant:

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through winter and summer seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.



The martyrs of the Easter Rebellion have ensured that life, in this cycle, will never be the same. Although they were stones in the midst of the living and are stones now that they are dead their martyrdom has created more political fanatics. It has also created a new source for Irish heroes which is opposed to the past, in which "men and women [were] valued for their manhood and charm, not for their opinions."<sup>19</sup> These new fanatics and heroes will also be stones in the midst of a life full of beauty as well as action, as Yeats illustrates:

A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it;  
The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
And hens to moor-cocks call;  
Minute by minute they live:  
The stone's in the midst of all.

In spite of the irresponsible and thoughtless death which resulted from it, the Easter Rebellion retains "a terrible beauty." Yeats cannot entirely downplay the connotations of heroism and glory which attend martyrdom. Whether or not he approves of the way in which the rebels used their lives, their deaths have become a part of Irish history, Irish culture and Irish myth, and to deny them the importance their sacrifice assigned them would count Yeats as one of the "unremembering hearts and heads" who endanger the traditions and institutions of the past. The adoption of martyrs proves that Ireland has maintained some amount of custom and ceremony and a respect for heroes, and Yeats must find this beautiful, even if he regrets the thoughtless and terrible political fanaticism which brought about the martyrdom.

Yeats continues his criticism of political causes in "On a Political Prisoner," which describes what happened to Con Markievicz in the Easter Rebellion. Yeats reveals that she

<sup>19</sup> W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), p.306.





could have been an image of the heroic Irish past, a "rock-bred, sea-borne bird" which:

...sprang out of the nest  
 Upon some lofty rock to stare  
 Upon the cloudy canopy,  
 While under its storm-beaten breast  
 Cried out the hollows of the sea.

The ability to weather the storm above the sea of political opinion is indicative of nobility and pride to Yeats, who understands Markievicz's choice to involve herself in the rebellion as a decision to degrade herself, to become:

Blind and leader of the blind  
 Drinking the foul ditch where they lie.

Yeats was disgusted by political activism because he considered it thoughtless and irresponsible. He wrote to Olivia Shakespear in a letter dated 13 July, 1933, that:

It is amusing to live in a country where men will always act. Where nobody is satisfied with thought. History is very simple - the rule of the many, the rule of the few, day and night, night and day for ever, while in small disturbed countries day and night race.

In addition to the disgust at the thoughtless action political fanaticism creates in men who are too absorbed to notice that their sacrifice cannot alter the cycle of "rule of the many, rule of the few," Yeats detests fanaticism because it is not conducive to the aristocratic sensibilities he assigns to both poetry and the past. In his Memoirs Yeats explains this assimilation of poetry and aristocracy:

Every day I notice some new analogy between the long-established life of the well-born and the artist's life. We come from the permanent things and create them, but instead of old blood we have old emotions and carry in our head that form of society which aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment...We too despise the mob and suffer at its hands.



Yeats saw himself as a sort of aristocrat, a person who was above political propaganda and the thoughtless and irresponsible actions it created, but combined this belief with a contradictory notion that his poetry could convince readers to act a certain way. In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, written some time in 1935, he declares propaganda as worthless since it does not appeal to artists, musicians, or lovers:

We must keep propaganda out of our blood because three important persons know nothing of it - a man modeling a statue, a man playing the flute, a man in a woman's arms.

Although propaganda is anathema to artists, who "come from the permanent things and create them," he knows that real artists, like himself, can be tempted to stoop to it. In an April 8, 1936, letter to Ethel Mannin he admits that he has once been "a politician:"

Do not try to make a politician out of me, even in Ireland I shall never I think be that again - as my sense of reality deepens, and I think it does with age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater...I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess - verse.

The contradiction between the artist as an aristocratic presence above mere politics and propaganda and the artist as a propagandist is one which Yeats resolves through differentiating between thought and action. In an Ireland he characterizes as a place where men must act and are not content with thought, Yeats writes poetry which encourages thought about the cruelty of governments, the terrible beauty of martyrdom, and the wretchedness of civil war. His poems are not jingoistic pleas for fanatical action. If they inspire any sort of rebellion it is a rebellion of thought rather than one of action. As he states in his Memoirs, he is a poet rather than a propagandist because "...words are with me a means of investigation, rather than a means of action."



In addition to protesting against the inanity of faith in political progress, Yeats dedicated a great deal of time and energy to provoking the public to think about the way a belief in progress affected modern poetry. The introduction and the poems he chose for inclusion in his edition of the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse, as well as "Under Ben Bulbin" reflect Yeats's passionate belief that poetry was following opinion and slipping into abstraction along with the rest of society.

The Oxford Book of Modern Verse is a declaration of Yeats's standards for modern poetry. His decision as to who was and was not considered modern was shocking and was seen by many critics as arbitrary. Yeats wished to include all poets whom he perceived as following:

...the road of naturalness and swiftness...think[ing]  
like a wise man, yet express[ing] ourselves like the  
common people...we need vast generalizations supported  
by tradition...swiftness and the lilt of songs in our  
blood.

In order to do so, it was necessary for him to begin with Victorian poets, so that, as Edward O'Shea points out in his Yeats as Editor, one-third of the poets included in the volume were dead by the time the book was published. Yeats chose to incorporate Victorian verse in order to demonstrate the heritage which ought to be remembered and improved upon by the modern generation. This may have softened the fact he was forced to include certain poets he disliked, such as T.S. Eliot. The inclusion of Eliot's poems allowed Yeats the chance to express his dissatisfaction with the direction modern poetry was following, criticizing Eliot for his descriptions of the modern world which seem to Yeats:

...grey, cold, dry. He is an Alexander Pope,  
working without apparent imagination, producing  
his effects by a rejection of all rhythms and  
metaphors used by the more popular romantics  
rather than by the discovery of his own, this  
rejection giving his work an unexaggerated  
plainness that has the effect of novelty....I



think of him as a satirist rather than poet.

The description of modern art as lifeless and cold is not a new one for Yeats. In his Autobiographies he discusses the contrast between the vivid art of the Renaissance and the cold and mechanical art of the present, describing the Dublin National Gallery, with its juxtaposition of a Strozzi portrait and Sargent's portrait of President Wilson:

Whatever thought broods in the dark eyes of that Venetian gentleman, has drawn its life from his whole body; it feeds upon it as the flame feeds upon the candle - and should that thought be changed, his pose would change, his very cloak would rustle for his whole body thinks. President Wilson lives only in the eyes, which are steady and intent; the flesh about the mouth is dead, and the hands are dead, and the clothes suggest no movement of his body, nor any movement but that of the valet, upon the candle - and should that thought be changed, his pose would change, his very cloak would rustle for his whole body thinks. President Wilson lives only in the eyes, which are steady and intent; the flesh about the mouth is dead, and the hands are dead, and the clothes suggest no movement of his body, nor any movement but that of the valet, who has brushed and folded in mechanical routine.<sup>20</sup>

Yeats anticipates the devolution of modern art into "mechanical routine," which he saw reflected in the poetry of Eliot, and of Wilfred Owen, whom he was successful in barring from inclusion in The Oxford Book of Modern Verse. Yeats defended this decision against the outrage of critics and the condemnation of friends such as Dorothy Wellesley. In a letter to Lady Wellesley dated 21 December, 1936, Yeats attempts to explain his decision:

When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution, and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum - however, if I had known it I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt, and sucked sugar

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<sup>20</sup> William Butler Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan Publishing, Inc., 1965), p. 194.





stick...There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him.

Yeats understands that there will always be poets similar to his idea of Owen - poets who rely on powerful emotional reactions to crude stimuli, and inspire reaction with action rather than with thought. The problem with such writers is not necessarily that their work "is all blood, dirt, and sucked sugar stick," but instead that the public do not know enough to recognize how thoughtless such work is.

"Under Ben Bulbin" expresses Yeats's dissatisfaction with a public that admires art he sees as inferior, and urges the modern world to produce something as good as the art of the past. According to Yeats good poetry must remember the past, and he encourages those who can remember, and who appreciate the importance of history, to ignore poets such as Owen:

Irish poets, learn your trade,  
Sing whatever is well made,  
Scorn the sort now growing up  
All out of shape from toe to top,  
Their unremembering hearts and heads  
Base-born products of base beds.

In addition to remembering the importance of history Yeats urges poets to return to writing about people who symbolize the glory and vitality of the past, rather than writing about the dissatisfied and disillusioned people poets like Eliot choose to describe. He asks the new poets to:

Sing the peasantry, and then  
Hard-riding country gentlemen,  
The holiness of monks, and after  
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter.

In this final poem Yeats asks his readers, and specifically, "Irish poets" to "Cast your mind on other days." They, and we, should recall the past in order to remain "indomitable." In Yeats's opinion the Irish were indomitable for seven centuries because they never let the modern world entirely



subdue them. Thus they have partially escaped the fate of the modern world which is expressed and dramatized in the art of Eliot and Owen.

Yeats is discouraged about the turmoil which characterizes the politics and art of his time, and which he traces back to the "unremembering hearts and heads" modern education has created, who cannot or will not remember the past before acting to effect the future. He realizes that there are certain events which will constantly reoccur, such as the drunken soldiery, the political fanaticism which makes men martyrs, the deterioration of great families and great houses, the degeneration of art, and the submission of the past to a philosophy which promises that the future will always be better. Yeats believes that there is hope for politics and art in the future even if these situations are destined to be repeated over and over again, since the cycle consists of periods of thoughtful action, beauty and peace to balance thoughtless violence and mechanized thought and art. Although the ancestral house may be crumbling, Yeats believes that honey-bees will fill the cracks in the masonry to create something useful and sweet. Similarly, he believes that the modern world of fragments has the potential to create a better political and artistic system if society can remember and improve upon the ruins of the past.



Yeats's fascination with history developed out of a need to unify his diverse interests. He relates the memory of a sudden inspiration:

One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: 'Hammer your thoughts into unity.' For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence. I had three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of Yeats struggling to unify his diverse interests is appealing to me, because narrowing his extensive and varied career as a poet, author, playwright, and public man into a concise subject was one of the most difficult problems I was faced with in the writing of this thesis. Narrowing my subject to Yeats's poetry was still too big, and I wound up choosing my sixteen favorite poems and attempting to find a theme which would unify them. An interest in history of some nature proved to be the common characteristic among the poems I selected, which enabled me to hammer my thoughts about Yeats into unity.

Literature, philosophy and nationalism may seem to have nothing to do with one another, but Yeats manages to hammer them into unity in his construction of a cyclical history. The struggle to reconcile three distinct interests into a unified idea makes Yeats a scrupulously honest poet. He is not content to accept one way of looking at his past, or relating the present problems facing Ireland, modern poetry, or himself. Yeats always understands there is an opposition, and is willing to present both sides of the opposition in his writing. Likewise, he understands that his three strongest interests can be unified in a discussion of history without trivializing or compromising any of them.

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<sup>21</sup> cited in Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 237 - 238.



His cyclical plan combines literature, philosophy and nationalism in order to invent a construction of history which describes ideas, events and people who were important to Yeats in an honest way. In addition to providing an honest portrait of its creator, Yeats's cyclical history allows him to look at history in order to use his family and friends to connect himself with the past, to place his personal poems within his cycle, to justify the cycle in poems which discuss its connection with art, myth, and spiritualism, and to firmly establish his historical position in Ireland and in modern poetry.





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